

Rough Experience on Alaskan Sledge Line

By THOMAS B. DRAYTON

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TRAVELERS in the United States and other countries, who are accustomed to the conveniences of parlor cars, modern ocean liners and comfortable automobiles, would find the ultimate of variety if not the extreme of satisfaction in traveling on an Alaskan dog-sledge passenger and freight line. Practically all Alaska mail contractors conduct a general passenger, express and freight business over the postal routes they cover. The tariffs charged for these various forms of service differ in different sections of the Territory according to the difficulties of transportation in the particular country to be traversed.

Freight rates range from 15 cents a pound for comparatively short hauls in coastal regions up to one

dollar a pound for the longer hauls into the interior. Passenger tariffs have been rather arbitrarily fixed by custom, rather than on any definite principle, but are reasonably uniform in most sections. Of course there are rumors that newcomers of apparent complacency and coin-upholstered attributes, wishing to engage passage, very frequently get a special, not to say benumbing, rate; but such rumors may have their origin in the jealous imagination of business rivals who were themselves denied participation in the rich and profitable shearing. However, on the regularly and frequently traveled routes, standard mileage rates usually obtain for passenger service, and are varied as a rule only to meet exceptional circumstances, such, for example, as extraordinary speed. The regular passenger rates vary from 25 cents to 50 cents a mile in the coastal regions; the higher rate obtaining around Norton Sound and Bering Strait points, and farther north. In the interior, where dog feed and other incidents of maintenance are proportionately more costly, the passenger tariff is around one dollar a mile.

Each line doing a general passenger business has its own rules and regulations, and a few maintain a system of passenger classification, as first and second class. In these more elaborately developed systems there is also a distinction between first class passengers, dependent upon the sex of the traveler. Thus, ladies are privileged and expected to ride all the way excepting where grades are so nearly perpendicular as to endanger their safety through spilling them out. Ascents are merely difficult, and involve no particular danger. Most accidents of consequence occur in descending these heavy grades. In such places the dog team is unloosed from the sledge and double rough-locks are placed upon the runners; and, in the very rare instances where invalids are carried, stout ropes and improvised windlasses are employed for letting down the sledge to less perilous grades. All male passengers are expected to get out and lend a hand where deep snowdrifts or other difficulties obstruct progress, and are also supposed to walk to relieve the strain upon the dogs while ascending grades of twelve per cent or more. Walking down exceptionally steep grades is optional with passengers although a prudent and thoughtful driver will always advise them of the consequences to be anticipated in the event control should be lost and the sledge catapult into an adjacent canyon or bring up against a boulder or massive tree.

But all of dog-sledge travel is not dangerous, nor is it always lacking in pleasant interest, or even keen amusement; howbe, the latter emotion is generally more relished, and not infrequently monopolized, by the driver. In traveling by dog-sledge a good many things are apt to happen enroute to upset one's peace

of mind, and, in the case of a particularly irascible passenger, to occasion him excessive annoyance. For example, now and then a team of dogs cannot resist the temptation to frantically tear off after a rabbit which happens to bound across the trail in front of them; in which case the long narrow sledge is pretty certain to upset upon leaving the beaten track and spill the dozing passenger into a bank of soft snow anywhere from five to twenty feet in depth. When sledge dogs have once acquired this rabbit-chasing fault it seems to be ever afterward an uncontrollable mania with them, and the only way to guard against perpetually impending disaster in rabbit-infested country is for the driver to trot along in advance of the team. Where this proceeding becomes necessary it is not required by the rules of any dog-sledge transportation line that the passengers get out and jog along on foot, but a fairly well-proportioned discretion would usually suggest this course where the trail is bad, unless, of course, the travelers are seeking experiences sure to be startlingly abrupt and apt to be distressingly numerous. Indeed, where the route is to be through rough country and two passengers are aboard, the seasoned traveler is invariably pleased to oblige his inexperienced companion by surrendering to him the cozy-looking reclining seat and take a place behind the handlebars. Of course there be canny ones now and then among the novices whose suspicions are first aroused by such seeming magnanimity and later strengthened by the

mirthless features is its constant tendency to slam-bang into the operator's ribs or wrench the muscles of his arms and shoulders as the runners slip and slide and careen from side to side on the rough trail; or where a rear dog shirks in his harness and the resultant scrimmage occurs, with the gee-pole and the gee-pole operator the center of the mix-up of fifteen to twenty-one frantic dogs.

FOR the benefit of those not familiar with dog-sledding it may be explained that the slightest momentary relaxation of effort by any dog on the team is instantly known and resented by every other dog, and instantly punished by the entire pack pouncing onto him unless the driver is near at hand and quick enough to anticipate them by the use of his whip on the offending shirker. It is unpleasant to be in the midst of such a mussy mêlée of snarling, snapping, vicious male-mutes, not only because such dogs are notoriously deficient in powers of discrimination, and absolutely indifferent to what they bite or where they bite it, but also because a passenger drawn into such a situation is apt to think himself ill-used and the service he is getting not worth the price he paid.

Although the handlebar assignment is to be preferred to the gee-pole, still a hypercritically exacting person might think even that position lacking in advantages. The handlebars are the two extensions of the upper framework of a sledge extending behind, one on either side, and are aptly named, as they are the bars by which the sledge is handled or its course directed. For one trotting behind the sledge it is possible with a quick spring, and by simultaneously throwing the legs into the similitude of an inverted V, to jump on the protruding runners and secure a bit of rest now and then. In point of fact, the temptation to jump on and ride is quite irresistible, particularly to a fleshy passenger who has been jogging along at a dog trot for several miles and finds himself badly winded. Right there misfortune rides hard upon the heels of the inexperienced who yields to temptation. In jumping for the runners the chances are ten to one he will miss one of them; in which case one foot sails merrily forward while the other struggles desperately to remain behind



Alaskan mail and passenger sledge enroute.

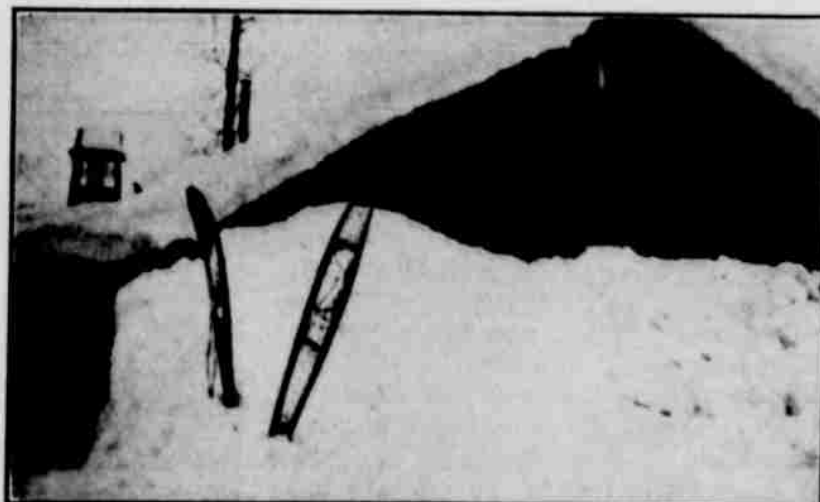


A characteristic stopping place enroute.



Terminal of Cordova-Kennecott dog-sledge line.

driver's infinite care in double-lashing to the sledge all loose packages and parcels; but the ordinary novice accepts with outward reluctance and secret satisfaction the kindness tendered; meanwhile philosophizing in his own mind that the world would indeed be a better place of residence if all men were so charmingly considerate and deferential. Of course his sentiments toward his kindly-disposed fellow traveler undergo a transformation after he has been spilled and buried in the snow a few times and possibly flattened out and skidded along for a rod or so, before the team can be stopped, first on top and then underneath the heavy sledge; but after such an experience a passenger is usually oblivious of all memories and other mental processes excepting only his newly-conceived idea to have Congress pass a law making dog-sledge travel a felony without benefit of clergy, outside the pale of law.



Terminal of Valdez-Fairbanks dog-sledge passenger line.



Seward terminal of Iditarod dog-sledge lines.

and implant itself firmly in the stable earth. It is really impossible to pass through this experience and retain one's composure. Indeed, irritable and highly emotional persons have been known to evince symptoms of both excessive vexation and astonishment at the results.

Just as often the novice in sledge jumping misses both runners. The resultant experience differs from the other only in detail, and not in its effect upon the elemental quality of dignity. If the sledge be on a down grade and moving at a considerable rate of speed and the passenger retain his grip upon the handlebars, his body at once assumes a convulsive, fluttering motion as it describes successive arcs between an instable horizontal and an uncertain perpendicular, while his feet alternately imprint themselves upon the trail beneath and perform frantic evolutions in mid-air; well illustrating what Col. Andy Simpson, Alaska's most original philosopher and keenest observer, would designate as "a poetic epic of indecision and uncertainty in the concrete."

While engaged as described, a passenger naturally becomes engrossed in a number of complicated problems; among others, whether it were wiser to loosen his grip on the handlebars and take a header into the icy trail, or hold on with the chances of being distributed piecemeal along the route.

Of course such experiences occur only in exceptionally rough country, and, naturally, at such times the driver up in front of the team is apt to be pretty busily engaged; but if by chance he notices the passenger's plight, and trail conditions make it possible, he will come to the rescue, slow down the team, the disheveled passenger will drop limply to the ground, and receive as a reward for his assumed carelessness comments which the driver intends as a stinging rebuke.



A typical interior dog-sledge trail.